5 times John asks Gale to kiss him (and one time Gale asks him instead)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/54496900.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationship:
Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Characters:
Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Additional Tags:
5 + 1 Things, Sexual Tension, they're both at war of course they'll fall in love, First Kiss, squabbles and other shenigans, homoerotic friendship, Gale Cleven sings, John starts doing something for shits and giggles, until he realizes he actually has to kiss the man

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-03-15 Words: 9,089 Chapters: 1/1

5 times John asks Gale to kiss him (and one time Gale asks him instead)

by NiciJones

Summary

So, these days when John baits him, it's mostly knowing that Buck would never give in. It's fascinating to watch each time it happens though and John can't get enough of it. The way his tempting words slide right off Buck where with everyone else, they would have sunk their hooks in. The immediate, careless, tempered, "No," that crawls out of Buck's throat in that raspy drawl.

Perhaps, John hadn't been told 'no' enough in his life and he's catching up with it now, collecting each one from Buck's lips to make up for the hundred times that no one was there to tell him as much in his youth. It drives him crazy that no matter how outrageous or how tame the suggestion is, the answer from Buck would always be no. So he keeps asking.

Notes

This is my first MotA fic and it's always a little awkward, the first time you write new characters and this was very much that. Just my attempt to poke around their brains. I hope you enjoy this little exploration nonetheless!

See the end of the work for more notes

/1/

John Egan does not completely understand how he befriended Gale Cleven. Gale is good. He's good at what he does - he flies like a madman and he knows he can pull it off. One of the only people in the whole goddamn Airforce that John knows can fly circles around him.

Unlike John - and most of the poor bastards here really - Gale is also a good man in the most traditional sense of those words. He has an iron-strong conviction in morals and what is generally deemed "good behavior." He doesn't drink, he doesn't gamble, he doesn't even kiss a dame here where his missus can't see it. He barely fights and he takes most jabs without blinking.

During basic training, it had been John's mission to see if he couldn't get Buck to break. He'd offer him drinks even when he was parched for a drop himself, he'd bait him into fights he knew he wouldn't win (some of those, Buck had taken him up on) and offered him a million bets - over half of which John surely would have lost. By the time they are stationed in England, he'd come to accept that Gale Cleven, Major of the Eighth Air Force, does not suffer from vices the way regular men do.

It makes sense, John knows now. He's seen him walk around the base, seen the awestruck looks on people's faces when Buck passes past them. He's something out of this world. It's just that for some godforsaken reason, Buck had also decided to keep John around. The man who refused to call him by the name his mommy gave him, the man who was always on the wrong side of the line - too loud, too provocative, too drunk - and who doesn't ever know how to stop.

So, these days when John baits him, it's mostly knowing that Buck would never give in. It's fascinating to watch each time it happens though and John can't get enough of it. The way his tempting words slide right off Buck where with everyone else, they would have sunk their hooks in. The immediate, careless, tempered, "No," that crawls out of Buck's throat in that raspy drawl.

Perhaps, John hadn't been told 'no' enough in his life and he's catching up with it now, collecting each one from Buck's lips to make up for the hundred times that no one was there to tell him as much in his youth. It drives him crazy that no matter how outrageous or how tame the suggestion is, the answer from Buck would always be no. So he keeps asking.

And perhaps, if John was entirely honest with himself, he'd admit that he's still waiting for the day or the ploy that gets to break Buck and then John will slip through the cracks and make himself at home in his ribcage. John Egan does not make a habit of being honest with himself though.

It's entirely predictable then that he would take it a step further, would grow ever bolder in his requests to Buck. They're in a bar and the soft, warm light makes Buck glow like he really is some divine being. One wholly untouched by human whims. There's a girl, too. John had looked just long enough to recognize her likeness to Buck's girl, Marge, back home until he'd averted his gaze.

"I know you're not gonna kiss her," John drawls, leaning into Buck's side who is leaning against the bar next to him, golden hair glinting in the light and falling just slightly out of the neat style after a long day on base.

"You want a gold medal, Major?" Buck asks, not even humoring John with his gaze, instead tracing their men spread around the establishment. That's fine, John can read it all on the side of his face as well. The movement of his lips as they wrap around each word.

"You know how I know that?" John asks, fingers wrapping tighter around the whiskey glass in front of him so he doesn't reach out and poke Buck's cheek to get him to look at him. It's fine. He doesn't need the blue eyes on him, examining him, figuring out where this conversation is going now. "Even though she looks like your little Marge, you'd never call it close enough to be the real thing. See, everyone else would say, 'I'm doing it just 'cause I miss her so much so it's not cheating.' Not you though." This time his hand does move into Buck's face but he manages to stop his pointer finger before it connects with Buck's skin.

The only man to inspire something as close to self-control in John.

Buck hums and bats his hand away. It falls back on the bar counter like a shot animal, twitching as the life goes out of it. "That's 'cause the others are dumbasses who are looking for excuses to not keep their dicks in their pants."

"Okay but you gotta miss it." He sees the eyeroll, knows that Buck knows what's coming next and can't help the grin spreading on his face. Oh, Buck won't know what hit him and the face he'll make would be so worth it.

“Bucky,” Buck sighs and John loves it so when he calls him by his name that is also his own now.

John leans closer, drunk on the whiskey and the challenge and the dim light in the same godforsaken bar they always find themselves in. “Kiss me then.”

Buck’s eyebrows draw together, his eyes widen, his head spins to (finally, finally) look at John and John is drinking it all in, every drop of shock and surprise and something that might best be described as fear. “I’m no dame, Cleven. Don’t count if it’s me, huh?” John purses his lips and makes kissing sounds, the way he and Curt do all the time (until inevitably they are no longer miming them across air but rather pressing them to each other’s skin, hands wandering under uniforms).

“No,” Buck rasps, his hand fitting itself to John’s cheek for a precious second as he’s shoving him away.

John chuckles and downs the rest of his whiskey. “Don’t say I’ve never done nothing for you.”

/2/

“How’s patient zero doing?” John would recognize that drawl everywhere, the deep voice curling around the syllables with amusement.

John grunts in answer. His head is killing him and he can barely breathe through his nose.

“Oh, that bad?” Buck asks but his tone is still teasing and John can feel the mattress dipping next to him.

John pulls the blanket higher. “Leave me. I don’t need your false sympathy.”

This time, Buck honest to God chuckles. “Woe is me, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ll be sorry when you dig my grave.” It’s not the first time John has caught something around Buck and the other had gotten used to the bouts of melodrama he suffers from whenever it happens.

Buck chuckles again. “Is it a cold?” He asks and then wonderfully cool fingers are brushing over John’s face, tucking his sweaty curls back and feeling his forehead.

“Mmh, might be the flu,” Buck assesses, sounding a little more serious now at least but when he moves to pull his hand away, John catches it.

“Feels nice,” he mumbles and presses it back to his burning skin.

“Well, you’re still bossy so it can’t be that bad.” It’s true that one time during flight training, John had caught something nasty. He’d been puking out his guts for days and days and they weren’t sure what it was or how to stop it. He’d been so dehydrated that he was never sure if Buck was real when he appeared next to him. He hadn’t asked for anything anymore, just taken whatever the Buck in front of him had offered.

Now, though, he keeps Buck’s hand pressed to the forehead, both of them uncaring that his skin is sticky with sweat. Instead, he feels Buck’s thumb slowly dragging over his skin.

John’s eyes flutter shut, certain he’s getting worse even with Buck’s touch. His thumb seems to leave a trace of fire in its wake and John starts to sweat again. It only makes him tilt his head up, pushing into Buck’s hand more firmly. Perhaps the touch would leave a visible mark on him, giving reason to people’s confusion when Buck isn’t by his side.

Buck stands up, pulling his hand out of John’s grip at last. “Alright, let’s get you out of bed. You need to shower and eat.”

John makes Buck drag and push him around most of the day, pouting when he disappears for a meeting or to fly a drill or for some other unimportant reason.

When he returns to John’s side, his fever has mostly died down. “You need me to bring you dinner in bed?” Buck asks and John knows that he doesn’t need to but damn if he’s going to pass up an opportunity to have Buck do the footwork for him while he leans back in bed.

“Would you?” He asks quietly, face mostly hidden in his pillow.

Buck sighs but that’s a good sign. John turns his head further into his pillow, hiding his smile.

“Fine, big baby. You wanted mashed potatoes and schnitzel or the pork chop?” Buck asks, discarding his hat on his bed before stepping over to John’s bunk. One of his last actions as an air exec had been to ensure that he would be assigned the bunk next to Buck’s. No one had

questioned it when he'd told them that they're comfortable performing their morning routine together, ensuring a quicker start before a mission day.

"Don't say it. It's the pork chop, isn't it?" Buck asks, settling on the narrow edge of John's bunk again.

"You know me so well," John mumbles into his pillow and he's teasing him but it's also true. There aren't a lot of poor bastards in this world that have actually bothered to get to know John. He'd always had people he called his friends, his loud and reckless behavior attracting bystanders. But Buck had always been a true friend. He knows that John gets dramatic with a stuffy nose and he gets into fights he should avoid and should probably be stopped before dancing and singing in front of their new men.

"Yeah I know. How's the cold?" Buck asks and fingers dip under the collar of John's shirt, feeling the temperature of his body. John shivers at the featherlight touch, wandering up to his forehead afterwards.

Instead of giving a response, he just grunts, knowing it would probably get him out of unwanted duties if he just complained hard enough about it. As much as Buck acts annoyed at John's melodrama he's usually also the first to give in and acquiesce to his wishes.

Like now, when his fingers linger on John's face, remembering how much he'd enjoyed the touch this morning.

"You don't feel as sweaty," Buck points out softly, palm pressing to John's cheek.

It amazes John every time, how Buck touches him like something breakable, like there's anything unbroken left and he's made it his mission to preserve it.

"Cold now," John mumbles, drawing the blanket up higher and it gets him the desired reaction - Buck's hand slips to his neck, feeling the temperature there again. It was a well-known secret that Buck could be a bit of a mother hen and no one has learned this quicker than John.

"Probably just the sweat drying," Buck assesses. "You should take another shower."

"Are you crazy?" John turns his head to look at him, sitting at the edge of his bunk. "The ice cold water would put me down for sure.

Plus having to get up and walk there and then take my clothes off? No thank you. I'll just suffer."

"Buck, you taking care of the whining baby?" One of the other majors calls down the long row of bunks filling the barrack. Buck's hand immediately disappears from John's skin.

"Yeah, you know how it is. He'll keel over and die any second now," Buck calls back, turning his head towards the man as his hand falls into his lap. John wonders if he's going to put it back once the other guy leaves and what that would imply about the touch.

"Right, right. Good luck with that." John can't see the guy but assumes he throws a mock salute before he hears his footsteps retreat. Either way, Buck's mouth tugs up into a small smile.

"You know it," Buck mumbles and meets John's eyes that slip back down to the hand in his lap.

"Yeah, you gonna take care of me, Buck?" He's teasing but as usual it's laced with something more, some insecurity that John is hesitant to name. People don't take care of John and perhaps that's why it's enticing to ask for more when he's sick, just to see when Buck would inevitably break and abandon him to his fate.

"Well, you weren't hit by flak so there's only so much I need to do but I guess I'm bringing you dinner, so…" The hand in Buck's lap doesn't move to find its way back to John's skin which seems a little like Buck isn't fully committing to the task if you asked John.

A small smile forms on his lips as the thought occurs to him. "You gonna tuck me in and give me a kiss?"

Buck rolls his eyes. He clearly has no interest in even entertaining John's silliness. John pretends that it doesn't matter to him.

"C'moooon, Buck," John argues and pushes himself up to sit, immediately falling into Buck's body, chin tucking over his shoulder. At the very least, it makes Buck chuckle. John's arms wrap around his waist and Buck doesn't touch his face again but it's just as well because now his hand falls onto John's forearm and he feels warm but for entirely different reasons. Buck smells like leather and sweat and his aftershave that has mostly worn off. John swears Buck bathes in that stuff. He wishes he could, too.

"You say this to all the girls?" Buck asks and he's smiling and it's so

bright in this dirty barrack.

“Usually it works, too.” John hides his grin in the leather of Buck’s jacket, knowing that Buck should probably push him away, just in case he’s still contagious but instead his fingers curl around John’s forearm, warmth seeping through the pajamas that John has been wearing all day.

“I hate to be the one to tell you this-” Buck says, turning his head a little to look at John out of the corner of his eye.

“Yeah?” John turns his head to face him, drinking in the swoop of his golden hair, the mischief in the blue eyes, the full lips.

“It’s because of your good looks and not because of your flirting skills.”

John squeezes Buck tighter to his chest, the same hot warmth curling in his stomach that resides there when he does flirt with women. “Oh, so you think I’m pretty?” John rips into him, shaking him a little in his grip. “Who’s flirting now, huh?”

Buck’s cheeks redden as he laughs, turning his head away from John like he doesn’t want him to catch his embarrassment. Of course, it’s impossible to miss. John can feel the weight of Buck trying to duck out of his hold but he only pulls him closer, their chuckles mixing. He notices how Buck fails to deny that he said what he did.

“You think I’m pretty, huh?” John asks again when their laughter dies down and it’s laced with something more now, a curiosity that perhaps John shouldn’t feel. It’s funny, of course, hearing that out of Buck’s mouth of all people. The first thing John had ever noticed about him was how gorgeous the man was, walking into the room at basic training. He had a little less muscle then but it had been his face that had made John do a double take. How do people like him end up in the fucking military and not the pictures? There’s a glowing flawlessness around Buck at all times.

John can feel him take a deep breath in his hold, chest raising and falling slowly. His head turns slightly to look at John again and there’s something sad in his eyes but John can’t figure out how it got there. They’d just been joking around, he’d just asked a question. It disappears as quickly as it appeared though, neatly tucked away like the corners of his blanket on his bed. “Maybe if you shave that monstrosity off your upper lip,” Buck teases.

John laughs and pushes Buck away, afraid of what else he'd discover in his eyes if he keeps looking.

/3/

The next time it happens John isn't sick or drunk but he might as well be. He's pleasantly buzzed and the adrenaline is doing the rest for him. He'd goated Buck into another bike race - *no point in having these if we don't use them for something fun every now and then, is there?*

There is very little that Buck is prone to but he's just as competitive as John, if not more so. All it had taken were a few well-placed jabs and Buck had fetched his bike - Bucky's bike that he'd given him - and they'd convened on the airstrip. It was almost pitch black out here, most of the soldiers celebrating or working inside. It doesn't matter to John, although he would have preferred to have an audience.

All it takes to give him that feeling, that feeling he only gets when there's a few thousand feet of empty air beneath his feet, is Buck's fingers curled into the shoulder of his uniform, stopping him from taking off early. It gives John permission to reach out and place his hand over Buck's sternum, evidently for the same purpose.

"No dirty play, Egan," Buck reprimands, increasing the weight he's putting on John's shoulder.

"Me?" John drawls, fingers curling slightly around Buck's tie that he somehow is still wearing. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Buck laughs and it makes John even more giddy, adrenaline coursing through his veins and it's as close to the rush of being in the air as he'll get while his feet are firmly on the ground. "On three."

"One, two, three." They count together before pushing off and hitting the pedals hard. Buck is great at maneuvering in a tight situation but out here with the straight airstrip in front of them it's just a test of endurance and plain out strength.

It's no surprise then that John takes the lead, cold air whipping through his hair and making his eyes tear up. He can hear the squeak of Buck's bike right behind him but he knows he has this in the bag. He crosses the edge of the tarmac, wheels hitting the dirt as he jumps off.

"Fucking told you!" John exclaims, arms spreading wide towards the sky as Buck skids to a stop. He drags in a desperate breath. Even

though it's dark, John can see his little smile that he tries to hide by dropping his chin to his chest.

"If only you dedicated all this energy into your duties," Buck mumbles.

John laughs, carefree and high on his win. "And what would be the fun in that?" He stalks up to Buck, eager to see the exasperated fondness up close, knowing that Buck would take the loss gracefully because there's nothing he does that isn't graceful. And for some reason there is nothing that John can do to make Buck turn away from him in disgust. That might be the most intoxicating drug of it all. The fact that none of John is too much for Buck. He knows how to handle all of it.

"How's it? Winner gets a kiss?" John asks because he feels high and Buck is just a little red in the face from chasing him and he thinks John is *pretty*. He takes another step closer that puts him firmly into Buck's personal space. He can smell the smoke of the bar, his aftershave and the sweat on his skin from this close. It's a heady mix and one he's come to know well with how often he pushes close to Buck, flailing until his hands end up on his back, his shoulders, sometimes his face if Bucky feels particularly daring. All seemingly by accident.

"I can't believe I have to explain this to you but that's not how betting works, Bucky." Buck is still sitting on his bike, one foot on the pedal like he's ready to flee at any given moment, moving on to greater things, better things.

"Not a bet, Buck," John drawls, leaning forward because he's never been able to leave well enough alone. It's dark enough he wouldn't say anything dangerous in his eyes - probably. "Just a sweet price for the rightful winner."

Buck rolls his eyes towards the sky. "You're insufferable." Like this, with his head tipped back, his neck stretches and John traces the bump of his Adam's Apple with his eyes, the scruff of his beard that had grown back throughout the day. He wonders what would happen if he'd reach out and touch.

It had been lingering and festering like a shrapnel under his skin. The horror on Buck's face the first time he'd asked him to kiss him. The sadness in his eyes when he'd asked him if he finds him pretty. John can't quite put his finger on why it makes him want to ask him again

but he sticks his finger into the wound anyway.

“C’mon. Buck. Kiss me. What’d be the harm?” John sways closer like he’s but a meteor caught in the sun’s gravity, close enough that when Buck turns his head, their noses almost brush, so close to burning up. For a moment, he sees Buck’s eyes slipping from his own and it’s probably the dark, probably the rush of blood in John’s ears but he thinks for a split second that Buck is considering it. And what would it be like if the always perfect Gale Cleven leaned in and pressed his full, plush lips to those of the dirty sinner John Eagan? He’s not sure, but he’s dying to find out.

“Kiss me, *Gale*,” John whispers, more a prayer than anything else, his heart beating against his ribcage like it’s rushing ahead of John to be closer to Buck.

Buck’s face scrunches up and he pushes off, strong thighs propelling his bike forward. “Race you back to base!” He calls over his shoulder and when John curses, it’s answered by Buck’s carefree laugh.

/4/

John doesn’t forget how he felt in that moment, breathless and desperate and alive in a way that it’s sometimes hard to feel. Like today when Buck and him hadn’t even gone wheels up and just watched as the squadron returned short of five planes. Fifty men lost. And for what?

John feels nothing when he counts the planes appearing in the sky and then feels angry when he realizes it. Of course, there were men lost. There always are and they can never replace them as fast as they drop from the sky.

Chuck was among them today, he learns and he still doesn’t feel a damn thing despite the fact that he’d been playing cards with the guy almost every other day since he got here. Sometimes, John feels like he’s never going to feel anything anymore.

It’s that thought that drives him to Buck that night.

“I need you to do me a favor,” he hisses, putting urgency into his tone as he pulls away before he can get ready for bed. It’s no wonder then that Buck follows him.

“What’s wrong, Bucky?” He asks, worried, as John drags him into the jeep and drives. He doesn’t have a clear idea of where he’s going,

other than away. Out of eyesight and earshot, most importantly.

“Bucky!” Buck yells next to him. “What happened?” The wind is trying its hardest to take away his words and John pays as much attention to them as if it did. There’s no point in explaining himself before he’s gotten Buck away from the others, eliminated the judgment of others as a possible source for him to say no.

He pulls off the road when he deems them far enough into the forest. It’s the middle of the night - no one would come looking for them on this unpaved forest service road. He puts the jeep in park and kills the engine.

“I need you to kiss me,” John says, matter-of-factly, turning to face him in the green jeep that they have spent hours in, driving across base and talking about all kinds of things.

Buck blinks. Then, of course, “No.”

“I’m not asking, Buck. C’mon, it doesn’t mean anything. You're not betraying Marge by planting one of me.” John ignores the way his stomach curls at that for some reason - and why is it the thought of her that manages to twist his guts and not the thought of Chuck burning up and hitting some German field? God, how he despises himself. There’s not a shred of honor in him, not the way Buck carries it so effortlessly like it was put into his cradle.

Buck’s lips are slightly parted as he stares at him, eyes darting over John’s face. “No, Bucky. You’re not thinking straight. What is really going on?”

John grits his teeth. Nothing is going on. Why can’t Buck just humor him? Why does he always have to be reasonable and logical when nothing around them has made sense in months? Down is up and left is right and men fall out of the goddamn sky no matter how talented they are. It’s pure luck that both of them are still here and the thought makes John want to tear his hair out.

“Why do you always gotta be so perfect, Buck? Are you even a man at all? You don’t *drink*, you don’t *fuck*, you just fly your goddamn missions and you’re fine?” John shakes his head, pulling the flask out of his jacket and unscrewing it hastily.

“Bucky,” Buck says and he has that tone, that voice he uses when he’s about to reprimand John for his drinking with pleading eyes. John can’t stand it, can’t stand him. He takes a big sip and it burns all the

way down but at least he can feel it.

“Do you care?” John asks then, tone biting. “Do you care about the men we lost today because I stopped feeling a goddamn thing ages ago and-”

Buck’s hand curls around John’s arm, stopping him from raising the flask to his lips again with a firm grip and, God, John hates him here. The way he stops him from drinking like that is a solution, like there is a better way to cope with all of this. John wishes he was the kind of man that could walk away with his head held high and the unwavering certainty that it was worth it. In short, the kind of man that Buck sees in him. To him, John’s gambling and drinking are just a facade that he’s put up to fit in. He has no idea that John is rotten to the core.

It’s that thought that makes him reach out with his free arm, not caring about the whiskey spilling over Buck’s lap from his open flask as he yanks him in.

John has kissed many people before - both men and women. This cannot honestly be called a kiss. It’s just a pressing together of lips, his desperation meeting Buck’s unmoving mouth. Whiskey-laced breath combining the peppermint John can still smell on Buck from his toothpaste. His lips have no business being this soft in the mess of war but John can’t find it in him to be surprised.

It doesn’t last longer than a moment and when John falls back his breath is coming fast and Buck is staring at him with wide eyes and John’s heart starting to beat in his chest, faster and faster and he’s alive. He really is alive. *Fuck yeah.*

John’s mouth stretches into a broad grin. “See? Didn’t hurt at all!”

Buck is still staring at him, eyes wide in shock and his lips slightly parted and John wants to lick between them, wants to scrape the taste of his toothpaste out of his mouth and feel more than just alive. He chases the thought of Buck’s hand cupping his face away with a sip from his flask. It’ll never happen and he would do well to remember that.

In the meanwhile, the shock on Buck’s face gets replaced with anger. It’s rare that Buck gets truly pissed off but in that moment, John can see the thunderstorm cross his face, brilliant blue eyes darkening with fury. “Don’t you ever do that again.” His tone is calm, dangerously so.

John does what he always does when faced with the consequences of his impulsive decisions: dig himself deeper until the other gives up or knocks him out. The fact that this is Buck, his best friend, doesn't make a difference. "Buck, c'mon, what's the big deal? Stop getting your panties all twisted. Do you really think Marge is not gonna marry you because of this?"

This time it's Buck's hand, curling into the collar of John's jacket but he's pushing him back against the door of the jeep instead, pushing out of his seat to hover over him. John blinks, realizing just how deep the anger runs. He was just joking around, just wanted to feel something to remind him he isn't already a corpse, wandering around the barracks waiting for his expiration date and this, well, it works just as well. Buck's fury is written in the set of his jaw and his furious eyes. It's always in his eyes and right now they are saying he would love to punch John, coming away with blood on his knuckles.

"Don't talk about her!" Buck's voice is deep and sharp and John swears he can taste his breath this close. *Or what?* He wants to ask, wants to keep prodding and figure out what exactly it was that made Buck lose his so carefully-kept composure. It's not the crack in his principles that John was hoping for but it intrigues him all the same. *What happens if I press here? Here?*

John licks his lips, his heart thudding in his throat and it's these moments he lives for. The balancing act along a fine line. This time, he doesn't fall but it's only because Buck takes the choice from him.

He pushes John into the door again for good measure before letting go, sinking back into the passenger seat. He shakes his head, staring ahead into the forest and John takes in the way his fingers curl and uncurl once, twice before they fall still against his thigh. His teeth are still clenched.

It hadn't mattered when John had kissed Curt - well, not more than it usually does. It had just meant a warm touch without any expectation, feeling human in the middle of a war designed to take every last shred of humanity from them. It shouldn't mean anything else to press his lips to Buck's. A shot of a drug to revive him.

Instead, he stares at Buck, an ache in his chest growing. He feels alive but he's not sure that the cost is worth this one. As he sits there, staring across the space between them that seems to grow bigger by the second, he recalls the ghost of another kiss he'd felt right after. He'd feel more than alive with Buck's gasped breath in his mouth.

He'd feel- John turns away from the sight of Buck's face, the one friend he's made in his life that had always been there, had never made him doubt that he cares about John. The one who can't be scared away by anything that John does.

This would do it.

John knows that with finality. So he turns the key in the ignition and turns the jeep around, feeling somehow worse than before.

"You shouldn't drive," Buck mumbles and John pretends he can't hear him.

When they get back to base, a lieutenant teases Buck about pissing his pants and John realizes he's all but forgotten about the splash of whiskey he'd left on his pants. He wonders later how long it took Buck to wash the stain out.

/5/

John is plagued by an overwhelming perception of the present moment. Everything is always happening right now. Neither tomorrow nor yesterday feel entirely real to him. Most days, John can't even fathom them. How can there ever be a moment that isn't right now? What good does waiting do when he can have the drink right now? Kiss the girl right now? Feel alive with a fist in his face right now?

Today, he's alive and kicking and in some ways that's all that will ever matter.

He can feel it when his boots hit the tarmac, adrenaline still coursing through his veins. They'd made it back in one piece and for today that's enough, more than enough even. Even Buck stomping towards him can't dim John's mood. They'd gotten the job done, what else is there to say?

"Egan!" Buck roars and John can feel the sympathetic looks of the others as they climb on the truck, ready to bring them to interrogation. "John Clarence Egan!" There's a faint chuckle from the men and John can't fault them. Buck always looks like a disappointed mother when he gets all protective. Or an angry wife, perhaps.

He has a feeling he knows what this is about.

"I should have you court-martialed - what was that up there, huh?!"

Buck asks and he's close enough now that John can see the blood coloring his cheeks. Still, even when he's angry, Buck is incredibly controlled in his movements, the anger boiling beneath his skin instead of on top of it.

"Relax, Buck, it all worked out, didn't it?" John asks and it's clearly the wrong thing to say, Buck's shoulders somehow tensing further as he steps into John's space, hands on his hips. How far would John have to push him to get those hands on him?

"Uhm- Major Cleven, we need you both at the interrogation," one of the men points out but neither of them even look at him.

"We'll catch up," Buck says and his tone is icy.

"Uhm, Sir-"

"Leave!" Buck yells, turning his furious gaze on the man now. None of them are used to seeing him angry and it has the desired effect. The man nods frantically - John doesn't even know his name, hasn't bothered to keep up with the new supplies of men. "Sir, yes, Sir." He flees.

When John tracks the retreat of the truck, he can see Roger on the back mouthing '*good luck*.' He'll probably need it.

As soon as they are out of earshot, Buck gets to the point. "You endangered your men and yourself."

"It was a calculated risk," John argues. "You know just as well if I hadn't drawn them over they would've gotten Blakey." There is only so much thinking that goes into his decisions in the air. Some of the risks are simply unknowable and in that moment John had been so sick of seeing his men die. He'd seen a chance to stop it - so he'd taken it.

"We fly B-17s not fucking fighter jets," Buck yells, shoving John so that his back hits the wheel of the plane. He lets it happen, lets Buck's anger rain down on him. It would have rattled you, he reads in Buck's face, his eyebrows drawn together. If I died, you'd care.

"Yeah, I've noticed." John leans back against the wheel, smiling at the neverending fury pouring out of Buck. He wants all of it, wants to drink it in until he feels whole again.

"I don't think you do, seeing how you flew today!" Buck barks and

he's so close now, his fingers curled into the collar of John's jacket. He's not been this close since that night in the jeep when he'd pushed John against the door and yelled at him, the same way he's doing now. They hadn't spoken about that night again and John avoids thinking about it - for the most part - but there's a rift between them. One that he doesn't know how to cross. They still talk and they still work well together but there's a disconnect, Buck always staying just out of John's reach, avoiding the hand which he stretches out to touch.

John just shrugs, not sure what Buck wants him to say here. He's not going to apologize, not when it saved ten men from death.

Buck huffs and John blinks, chasing his gaze but then finding it too much to bear. He stares ahead instead, letting Buck read on his face whatever he wants.

"You really don't care, do you?" Buck asks and for a moment, John doesn't know what he means. Clearly he cares about the men they would have lost. "Do you *want* to die?" Buck adds and there's a tender softness in his voice that is somehow more brutal than the anger.

John knows how to handle anger. He has no idea how to handle this.

He weighs Buck's question. The answer seemed so simple once upon a time. The truth is that right now John is alive and he knows that one day in the future he won't be. That's as much as he allows himself to think about his own death. "We all gotta die some day, Buck. Don't matter if I want it or not." He meets his eyes, lets him see that it doesn't bother him, doesn't keep him up at night.

Buck's eyes dart back and forth across John's face. "It makes a difference and you know it," he says quietly, the deep scratch of his voice fueling the fire in John's gut.

It doesn't make a difference to John who lives in this moment, with Buck's face close to his and his voice in his ear. None of it matters when Buck is pressing him against the wheel of this plane that John crawled out of alive and breathing and Buck gives a fuck about that.

"And what's it to you, huh?" John baits, wants it written on his skin how angry Buck was that he'd put his life in danger. John's hands come up and it's a stupid, stupid idea but he settles them on Buck's hips, testing how far Buck would let him go. He welcomes the possibility of Buck forcing his hands off, strong grip on John's forearms. It's all the same as long as Buck stays here, looking at him

like he's the only thing on his mind.

Buck doesn't though and the rush of that is even better. "For a moment up there I thought you were sacrificing yourself." His voice is quiet now and if they weren't so close, John would have surely missed it. "Don't ever do that again." Buck holds his gaze like it could imbue John to be careful.

The ugly truth is that it makes John want to do it again and again so that he gets him here, pressed against his body, willing to tolerate John's hands on him to get his point across. He's known Buck for years now - somehow it's only now that he recognizes the hunger in his chest that's always been present around him. It had grown, slowly but surely until now when it is so great that the hunger seems to consume John right back.

It should be enough, to just have Buck as his friend, to have him care about him and enjoy the casual touches he allows John.

It isn't though and John begins to think it never was. It was only ever enough to get him addicted.

So he keeps pushing. "Why not?" John asks. He curls his fingers into Buck's jacket at his hips, feeling the weight of Buck against him, pressed together from shoulders to thighs. "Were you scared?" He whispers.

"I'm serious, Bucky," Buck pleads.

"So am I," John says and his fingers dig into Buck's hips, trying to pull him impossibly closer. He needs to know, needs Buck to say the words and tell him what he's been showing him through his anger. "Any of us could die at any point, Buck. Can't let this compromise you." Of course, Buck is nothing but compromised here, pressing him into the wheel and his eyes burning into John's.

"Don't-" Buck whispers and it's desperate, the pain evident on his face. The leather of John's jacket creaks in his tight grip. "Don't you die on me," he prays.

It's heady, the feeling pouring out of Buck, the desperation with which he clings to him like it would prevent the Krauts from plucking him out of the sky. John believes it, for a moment. His heart racing in his chest and his past stretching out behind him like a one way road that led him here, that gave him the audacity to put his hands on the small of his friend's back and pull him closer, push his forehead to his.

It's not much. Buck will forget that this happened like he forgot about the night in the jeep. But not John. John will cling to it when he sputters his last breath in some German potato field. It's the thought of that, death feeling close and inevitable to him for once and so far away from someone as holy as Buck Cleven. Like a dog's master, John is just one part of his life but Gale *is* John's life.

He can see Buck's eyelashes fan out over his cheeks, his eyes closed with them so close together but John doesn't want to miss a thing, wants to remember every freckle on Buck's skin until he can point to them with his eyes closed. "Buck, please," he knows this is all he'll ever get but he can't believe it. Not when the ache in his chest seems so large that he might die of it, his aching heart bleeding out and staining Buck's sheepskin jacket. Now that would be something, leaving a stain to be remembered every time Buck climbs into his plane. "Kiss me," he tells him because he almost died today and he will almost certainly die tomorrow and who knows how many more chances he'll get to ask the impossible of Buck. Even if the answer would never change, it feels imperative to ask and keep asking. What else is there to do for John?

The pressure of Buck's forehead against his own increases, like he's pulled towards him but his mouth stays achingly out of reach. John can't be the one to force himself on him again. He won't do it.

"I can't, Bucky," Buck whispers and John can feel his forehead crease against his own. "I can't."

And it's not '*I don't want to*' and it's not *'your love suffocates me'* but it doesn't change the outcome either way. John asks and Buck tells him no.

Their embrace lasts another breathless second and then Buck is wrenching himself away, one hand running through his hair and his shoulders falling and rising with a desperate breath that he drags in. Meanwhile, John is falling with both his boots firmly rooted to the ground.

/+1/

It's always busy at Thorpe Abbotts. It's rare that the two of them find some time to themselves that isn't also a duty call of sorts. If they do have downtime, it's usually spent at the bar.

So, it's surprising when they find themselves in the barracks with no one else around. Most of the men are on a mission and John

remembers the days in which they would sit around, breathless, wondering if there would be casualties. These days, they know there will be and rather spend their time before the return in blissful ignorance of the fact.

Like right now, when there's soft music crackling from someone's radio and it's just Buck and him. It feels a little like those days in basic training when the sky was wide above them and they felt like they were going to conquer the world together. In some ways, John's purpose has become to chase these moments.

"Hey, remember this song?" John asks with a wide grin and starts to sing along. "*Let people wonder, Let 'em laugh, let 'em frown."*

There's a fond smile on Buck's lips, one that has become equally as rare. Now it's there lighting up the whole goddamn airbase and it only eggs John on, grabbing Buck's hands between the long rows of the bunk beds.

"You know I'll love you 'til the moon's upside down. Don't you remember I was always your clown?" The words catch a little in John's throat, laden with something more as he sways Buck's hands in an attempt to get him to dance with him. Of course, Buck Cleven doesn't dance, least of all with John Egan. Buck looks around nervously but relaxes a little when he discovers just how empty the airbase is. "*Why try to change me now?"* John adds, pushing his luck by putting a hand on Buck's shoulder and pushing him back, following him like they are dancing.

Buck looks at him and when their eyes meet it's like he can see right through John's easy levity, his attempt at being playful. John's heart sinks. Why can't Buck just pretend? Isn't he usually so good at shoving everything aside? Why not here, too? Can't he pretend he doesn't know that John aches for his touch? John pretends, after all.

But then, the pity melts and leaves something behind that John is afraid to name. Warmth twists in John's gut like a sip of his favorite whisky. Buck looks over his shoulder again and John thinks he's about to pull away but instead when he turns back to him, his hand finds John's waist, pushing John back again and following him. Are they dancing?

"*Why can't I be more conventional?"* John can feel his eyes widen, the scratch of Buck's singing voice a wholly new experience that sends shivers down his spine. *"People talk and they stare, so I try."* John

fumbles for Buck's other hand, feels the calluses in them as it wraps around his own and Buck spins them between the bunks. John's heart trips. Buck always says no - then why is he here, offering a dance to him, crooning softly in John's ear? *"But that can't be, because I can't see, My strange little world just go passing me by."*

John knows that he's staring but he can't help it. Even though this is what he asked for he doesn't quite understand why Buck would give it to him, feeding the longing he has to see written on his face every day.

"Bucky," Buck says quietly, breath hitting John's cheek in a mockery of a caress. "We can't do this." The song fades and they come to a stop, still in the middle of the barrack but neither of them steps away.

"What?" John asks, more confused and desperate than he's ever been.

"*This*. We can't do this. I- I owe it to Marge to try and be good. And you, too. You have a chance at something real out there. You know that, right?" Buck asks and John is aware of their fingers still curled together, of Buck's hand on his waist. None of it explains the words coming out of his mouth. They are not doing anything. Fine, maybe they shouldn't be dancing, certainly not in broad daylight, but it really hadn't taken much convincing from John. He won't accept responsibility for this particular instance.

Buck shakes his head. "You might think you want this but I know you. You'd get bored and you'd move on to the next shiny thing, another challenge to sink your teeth into and- I can't do that." Buck's gaze drops from John's, landing somewhere closer to his collarbones instead.

John swallows, puzzle pieces slowly falling into place. He hadn't really thought that they would ever talk about it and they barely are. Buck isn't saying anything but it's enough. "Is that what you think of me?" John asks, unable to mask the hurt. Yes, he's loud and moves from one thing to the next quickly, nothing ever holding his attention for long but none of them are Buck. It was never like that with him.

Buck even denies him the idea of loving him properly.

"Bucky," Gale says softly, looking up at him again, swallowing and he doesn't say anything else, probably unable to even do that. How can Buck stand there and accuse him of loving him like a summer fling when John loves him like war loves death, relentlessly and inevitably?

“No, no. You don’t get to say this shit to me.” John shakes off his hand and takes a step back.

“Bucky,” Buck hisses and catches his sleeve. “I couldn’t just walk away from this, don’t you get that?”

It undoes the last shred of self-control that John was holding onto. Buck wanted to talk about this? Fine, then they would talk about it. “And you think I can? Do you think I will?” Buck seems to shrink under John’s fury, pain creeping back into his eyes. “You’re the one with the happy ending waiting for him, Buck. Me? This is it. This war, all my friends dying one by one…” John throws his arm out, gesturing around the miserable airbase that they call their paradise. “… you. *You’re* it for me, Buck, so don’t you go telling me about how hard this is for you.”

Buck looks at him like John just gutted a bunch of puppies in front of him and he feels sick with it. It’s John’s pain, it always has been. How dare he feel sorry for him!

“Please, Bucky, you could have anyone.” He has that look on his face, the one that speaks of empathy, a tenderness that has always felt misplaced in this war. People think that Buck is tough but John knows it’s all a facade. There’s still a boy inside of him, curled up and crying, hoping that perhaps one of these days he won’t have to rescue himself. “You’re a good man,” Buck emphasizes.

John can’t help but snort. “Please, you don’t even believe that. You’re the first person to complain about my drinking and my gambling and my whoring around.”

Buck opens his mouth, probably to voice another protest that’s just another excuse he tells himself. He’d wanted to kiss John that day against the plane and they both know it. John hadn’t made him dance with him or sing a song to him. Gale so likes to pretend he can do no wrong while life goes on without him ever taking a risk.

Not making a choice is still making one.

“No! I don’t want to hear it!” John shoves him backward, Buck stumbling and looking at him with wide eyes. “You don’t get to pretend that you don’t know that this is happening. You can walk the other way, Buck, but you don’t get to pretend you can have her and not hurt me at the same time.” John can see the pain in Buck’s eyes again and wishes he wasn’t so practiced at picking up the tiniest signs that betray how he feels. But the truth has always been that John

wants every piece of Buck that he can get, so he studied and learned until he could interpret every repressed twitch of his face.

Usually he'd leave well enough alone by now, afraid to hurt Buck and lose him completely but not today. Today, he needs Buck to understand what he's doing when he lies to himself. "Sometimes you have to make a choice in life and no matter what you do, people will end up getting hurt!" John can feel his heart racing and tries to get out what he's been needing to say so desperately ever since this silly little game he used to play of goading Buck turned into something much more serious, something much more desperate.

"We might die here," John says and he knows they shouldn't talk about it, should knock on wood and forget just how many corpses they don't even see but he keeps going anyway, "so we have to decide how we want to live. How do you want to live, Buck?"

Buck stares back at him, fear prevailing over pain and surprise. John remembers the day against the plane so clearly, remembers Buck's breathless whisper of, *I can't.* Who is Buck when he abandons the version of himself that he's created to appease everyone in his life? The good boy that got himself out of a terrible situation? Even though John hadn't been aware of it, he knows now that it had always lain beneath the poking. Is there a version of Buck that could love a rotten man like John and lie with him in the dirt? John holds his gaze, knows it is out of his hands now. *Could you sin with me instead of striving to be my savior?*

Buck's eyes slip to John's mouth and he can see his breath hitch. "You have to be the one to say it, Buck, because I can't-"

"*Kiss me.*"

John's lips are on Buck's in a second. He's been patient and he's been good - he's not going to wait for another second to taste his lips, to curl his fingers into the front of Buck's uniform and kiss him within an inch of his life. It's not really an answer and it's certainly not a solution but Bucky also can't find it in himself to be overly concerned with it. Not when Buck's fingers are in his hair and he's pulling him closer.

End Notes

I know this leaves room for more but I really wanted to move on to something else and do a more in-depth exploration there. This was really just me stretching my fingers. Would be a bit of waste to not post at all though.

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